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## CHAPTER TEN

### IS ARISTOTLE A VIRTUE ETHICIST?

Joachim Aufderheide

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle is the sacred cow of virtue ethicists. Or perhaps better: he is one of the sacred cows. Defining ‘virtue ethics’ ostensibly by pointing at Aristotle was useful when virtue ethics was revived in the twentieth century. Now virtue ethics no longer needs to piggy back on Aristotle: neo-Aristotelian ethics is regarded as merely one species of the genus ‘virtue ethics’, among Confucian, Humean and even Nietzschean species.<sup>1</sup> While virtue ethics does not entail Aristotelian ethics, few adherents of the creed deny Aristotle’s quasi-sacred status: non-Aristotelian virtue-ethicists have tried to broaden their sect, not to kill one of their sacred cows.

Since virtue ethics stands on its own two feet now, we can reasonably ask whether Aristotle’s ethics is a species of virtue ethics — just as we can reasonably ask whether Plato is a Platonist, or whether Kant is a Kantian. But why ask the question? Plato’s case illustrates the point: many students come to Plato with the preconception that he believes in heavy-duty Forms and that he has certain outlandish views about the soul. Worse, many read Plato only to confirm their Platonist view of Plato (and never grow out of it). Similarly, if we approach Aristotle’s ethics expecting to find a virtue ethics, we may oversimplify his ethics or get them wrong.<sup>2</sup> So, why not simply read Aristotle and put the question of virtue ethics to one side? Asking whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist serves two purposes: to inform contemporary virtue ethics, insofar as an answer may present a more nuanced connection between Aristotle and virtue ethics than usually taken for granted; and to improve our understanding of the structure of Aristotle’s ethics, insofar as certain of its structural features are highlighted by asking questions arising from virtue ethics. Thus, by studying each theory in its own right, but with a view to comparing them, we can gain a new and illuminating perspective on both.

But how to line up virtue ethics and Aristotle’s ethics with a view to comparing them? Are we not distorting Aristotle’s ethical theorising if we bring a distinctly

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If I have learnt anything from MM McCabe about doing ancient philosophy, then it is to start with the text, read the text carefully and try to figure out what the text says in its own right. She has, moreover, the gift of bringing dead philosophers alive by inviting us to look at our questions and concerns from their perspective. In my tribute to her, I hope to catch some of her magic.

<sup>1</sup> See the papers in Russell 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Since most philosophers take Aristotle to be a virtue ethicist per default (‘virtue ethics is what Aristotle did’, Putnam 1988, p. 379), hardly anyone explicitly *argues* that Aristotle is a virtue ethicist (with the exception of Mcleer 2007).

contemporary question to his text and expect Aristotle to have an answer?<sup>3</sup> Every serious scholar takes care not to simply apply our conceptual framework to Aristotle's texts, or any framework alien to Aristotle's. We can avoid the problem of distorting Aristotle by construing the title question as a question about the relationship between ethically good action and virtue. While I do start with *our* question, not Aristotle's, the relevant texts nevertheless show *his* theoretical commitments — if read properly. And read the texts we must: rather than comparing Aristotle's politico-ethical system on a grand scale to contemporary virtue ethics,<sup>4</sup> I propose to concentrate on key texts, the definition of virtue in 2.6 and the good person as measure in 3.4.

## 2. VIRTUE ETHICS AS ETHICAL THEORY

Most contemporary virtue ethicists see themselves as proposing and defending a distinct approach to ethics, distinct from its deontological and consequentialist rivals.<sup>5</sup> We should not confuse virtue ethics with virtue theory. If we do, we might be led to conclude that virtue ethics could not be 'a thing on its own' because virtue theory 'is so obviously an important element of both [Kantianism and Utilitarianism]'.<sup>6</sup> A virtue theory studies the nature of the virtues (which traits are virtues; how to acquire them; their moral psychology), usually without making a deeper theoretical commitment to any specific ethical theory, whereas virtue ethics seeks to provide a fully-fledged normative theory, comparable in scope to its perceived rivals. Both Kant and Mill do study the nature of virtue, but without endorsing a virtue ethics. Observing the distinction between virtue theory and virtue ethics, we must ask what role virtue would need to play in virtue ethics as a distinct approach to normative ethics.

Given the variety of virtue ethical approaches, we should not become exasperated over the vague answer 'that a theory is virtue ethical if virtue notions are *sufficiently* central in that theory'.<sup>7</sup> While this "definition" fails to specify *the* role virtue or virtue-notions need to play in a virtue ethics, it pushes us towards considering what is central to an ethical theory — and we clearly can have a plurality of concerns: for instance moral epistemology, reasons, motives, consequences, happiness, emotions and right action. Instead of considering the whole gamut of concerns, I shall focus only on

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent exploration of Aristotle's relation to contemporary ethical theorising, see Broadie 2007 who also touches on my title question.

<sup>4</sup> Like Simpson 1992 and Buckle 2002, and to a lesser degree Santas 1993 — all of whom dissociate Aristotle from virtue ethics.

<sup>5</sup> At the end of the last century Rosalind Hursthouse hoped that 'future generations of moral philosophers ... will lose interest in classifying themselves as following one approach rather than another; in which case all three labels [sc. deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics] might become of merely historical interest' (Hursthouse 1999: 5). However, two pages later, she declares that '[a]s things are now, the approach is still new enough to be distinctive'.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum 1999: 167, who does not make the distinction.

<sup>7</sup> Swanton 2013: 334. Nussbaum 1999: 201, proposes 'to do away with the category of "virtue ethics"' because of the variety of virtue ethical approaches.

right action or rather ethically good action — not because a virtue ethical account of right action defines virtue ethics, but because this concern, more than the others, helps differentiate normative theories. An account of ethically good action — my neutral term for right, good, or appropriate action — is central to an ethical theory:<sup>8</sup> it provides a framework that enables us to evaluate and justify what we or others should do or should have done.<sup>9</sup> While different species of virtue ethics differ significantly over the roles of motives and happiness, they agree on a general level in their accounts of ethically good action. Moreover, if two ethical theories have substantially different accounts of ethically good action, they belong to distinct genera. However much Kantians and consequentialists can learn from virtue ethics about emotions or practical reasoning, i.e. however much they adopt for their respective virtue theory, they cannot adopt a virtue ethical account of ethically good action. The account of ethically good action is a fault line of ethical theories; the other concerns provide less clear-cut divisions.<sup>10</sup> Whether Aristotle has a virtue ethics thus hangs on his account of ethically good action.

All species of virtue ethics that purport to offer a normative ethics deny that ethically good action can be defined independently of virtue. While different species will spell out the relation differently, we can take the dependence of ethically good action on virtue as a distinguishing mark of virtue ethics: the genus ‘virtue ethics’ differs from other genera of moral theories in making ethically good action dependent on virtue.<sup>11</sup> Virtue terms which define ethically good action must therefore not rely on any prior notion of ethically good action. In particular, when defining certain traits of character as virtues, the definientia must not smuggle in other normatively foundational notions specifiable independently of virtue, such as law or the good, a point which applies to all virtue ethical definitions of right action. To examine the relation between virtue and

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<sup>8</sup> I use ‘ethically good action’ instead of ‘morally good’ in order a) to remain neutral on the question whether Aristotle had a conception of morality similar to our own (denied, perhaps most prominently, by Anscombe 1958), and b) to bring out that for Aristotle there is something good about right actions, however difficult it may be to specify just what this ‘something’ is. I am not suggesting that the goodness alone fixes the ethical status of the action; I do not presuppose a teleological or deontological framework.

<sup>9</sup> I omit action guidance deliberately, as the theoretical account of right action need not, and in many cases does not, guide action in the sense that the agent uses the account of right action to determine the thing to be done. The point applies not only to many forms of consequentialism and deontology, but also to the canonical, though slightly disreputable, virtue ethical account of right action as ‘an action is right if and only if it is what the virtuous person would do.’

<sup>10</sup> For instance, both deontologist and consequentialist theories can embrace the insight that wisdom (*phronēsis*) provides the best and sometimes the only guide to finding out the right thing to do in a particular situation (*pace* Mcaleer 2007: 220).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Russell 2009: 65-70 and 105. A virtue ethical definition of ethically good action may either appeal only to notions wholly derivable from virtue or virtue terms, or, more weakly, appeal to notions that are not wholly independent of virtue notions (cf. Swanton 2013).

ethically good action in Aristotle, I shall ask two questions: a) is ethically good action dependent on virtue? And b) is virtue dependent on ethically good action?

Although Aristotle does not explicitly use the concepts of theoretical dependence or independence in the *Ethics*, he would recognise at least three ways in which ethically good action could depend on virtue, were ethically good action to depend on virtue: i) a person must attain virtue before being able to perform ethically good actions; ii) the definition of ethically good action relies on the notion of virtue which in turn can be defined without reference to ethically good action; and iii) the virtuous person, her reason or responses, at least partly constitutes what counts as ethically good action — which obviously resonates with i) and ii). Aristotle understands the first two kinds of dependence in terms of priority: virtue may be temporally prior to ethically good action and/or prior in account and knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Following Aristotle's terminology, I shall pursue my title question in terms of priority: if the definition of virtue does not rely on a prior notion of ethically good action and if the account of ethically good action does rely on a prior notion of virtue, then Aristotle's ethical theory is a virtue ethics; if virtue is defined through a prior notion of ethically good action, and ethically good action does not in turn rely on a prior notion of virtue, then the structure of Aristotle's ethics differs from that of contemporary virtue ethics and we should not "make" him a virtue ethicist.

### 3. VIRTUE, ETHICALLY GOOD ACTION AND THE MIDDLE

Examining the relative priority of virtue and ethically good action raises a difficulty: Aristotle does not provide a neat definition of ethically good action. Ethics starts from the question how one should live. While much of recent moral philosophy concentrates on actions, Aristotle offers a much wider perspective: the quality (or success/failure) of a life depends not only on individual actions, but also importantly on the states of character of the person living it, together with the moral psychology tied to character. Many recent virtue ethicists, starting from Anscombe, welcome this change in view and suggest we follow Aristotle in making states of character the primary ethical notions. Although Aristotle does not explicitly define ethically good action, we can examine the relation between virtue and ethically good action through studying the so-called 'doctrine of the mean' from which we can glean Aristotle's account of ethically good action.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.1 Ethically good action and the middle

Aristotle introduces the notion of the 'middle' in his discussion of habituation in 2.4. Good building and good actions within the spheres of justice or courage help the

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<sup>12</sup> I do not think that virtue is prior in the first sense in 2.4, but I cannot argue for it here. In *Met.* 9.8 Aristotle additionally mentions 'priority in being' in an argument to establish the priority of actuality over potentiality.

<sup>13</sup> While I keep the conventional 'doctrine of the mean', I shall usually translate *meson* as 'middle' and *mesotēs* as 'middle state', the most basic meaning. In the course of his discussion, Aristotle expands on how we should understand the words.

learner attain the desired craft or virtue, and good actions accord with right reason: learner and expert alike must do what is right, appropriate, good, or reasonable within the sphere of action (they must act *kata ton orthon logon*, 1103b31-2). But what is the right and good thing to do apart from ‘acting in accord with right reason’? Aristotle responds by invoking what turns out to be a central feature of his theory of virtue: the middle, a highly context-sensitive notion (1104a3-10). Aristotle introduces the concepts of ‘excess’ and ‘deficiency’ with the examples of strength and health (1104a14-18). To become strong, you must train neither deficiently, nor excessively. The example should be familiar enough to illustrate Aristotle’s point: training too often, or for too long, or with weights too heavy, or at the wrong time — all of these dimensions contribute to the quality of the training, and getting them wrong will lead to inferior results. Getting the dimensions right — or, as Aristotle says, doing what is well-measured (*summetros*, a18), lying between deficiency and excess (cf. a25-6) — will help attain the desired state. Similarly, both fleeing or facing every danger are excessive or deficient responses compared to the courageous person’s response: she runs or stays only when appropriate because she discerns the relevant features of the situation, an ability the learner can only acquire with a measured or middle approach to facing danger (cf. a25-7).

Expert and learner alike must do the just or moderate things — actions which lie in the middle and are characteristic of virtue. Aristotle spells out the dimensions in which emotional and practical responses must hit the middle to count as best: neither too much nor too little, at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim and in the right way (1106b18-24). Aristotle thus specifies praiseworthy actions otherwise than by applying virtue terms: ‘excessive and deficient responses are wrong and censured, whereas the middle is praised and right’ (b25-27).<sup>14</sup> If we follow Aristotle in going beyond the virtue terms in act appraisal, we should not stop at the notion of right reason — which Aristotle sets aside — but go, with Aristotle, all the way to the notion of the middle response. Since, then, the notion of middle response plays a central role in Aristotle’s account of action, I suggest we regard hitting the middle in action as roughly equivalent to the sought after notion of ethically good action.

### 3.2 Virtue and the middle

The central importance of the doctrine of the mean also shows in the identification of the virtues. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists tend to identify the virtues by reference to human flourishing, or happiness.<sup>15</sup> While Aristotle acknowledges that ‘the virtue of a human being is the state of character on which her goodness depends and as a result of which she will accomplish her function well’ (1106a22-4), he does not try to derive any specific virtues from the definition of the human good. The quote

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<sup>14</sup> Following Rassow’s text as reported in Susemihl’s apparatus.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Hursthouse 1999.

invokes the famous argument from 1.7 in which Aristotle gives content to the human good, happiness, by considering the human function: accomplishing the human function well, exercising the rational part of the soul well, *is* exercising the virtues. But relying on the bipartition of the soul into irrational and rational (obedient and directive), Aristotle concludes only that there must be virtues of character and virtues of intellect, both of which are pertinent to happiness (1.13). Thus the definition of happiness, and therefore what is good for the possessor of virtue, is too general to identify specific virtues of character, especially if the virtues are moralistically conceived.<sup>16</sup>

Aristotle presents a list of virtues. In 2.7 he enumerates eleven virtues, apparently displayed on a chart (*ek tēs graphēs*, 1107a33-4) without indicating how he created the list.<sup>17</sup> The list, moreover, does not merely illustrate the sort of virtues one could analyse: turning to the individual virtues, he wants to show ‘what they are, and what they relate to, and how. And at the same time it will be obvious how many there are’ (3.5.1115a4-5), by which he either means to highlight the numerousness of the virtues (as opposed to Plato’s cardinal virtues), or else to offer a closed list. In any case, the whole discussion of ethical virtue relies on the doctrine of the mean: not only does the list of virtues in 2.7 sandwich each virtue between two vices; Aristotle also trusts that ‘we will understand the character traits more fully if we go through them case by case, and we will be more firmly convinced that the virtues are middle states when we see, synoptically, that it is so in every case’ (4.7.1127a15-17). So, while the content of happiness (and benefit) constrains which traits count as virtues, key to identifying the virtues for *Aristotle* is the doctrine of the mean.<sup>18</sup>

We can now reformulate the question whether ethically good action is prior to virtue or vice versa in terms of the middle: what is the relation between the middle response in action, and virtue as a middle state between two vices? A virtuous person will respond well both in action and affection to any given situation because virtue aims at and hits the middle (*tou mesou ... stochastikē*, 1106b15-16). But does the response count as middle because it stems from a middle state? Or does the state count as middle because it tends towards middle responses? Which middle, in other words, is prior?

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<sup>16</sup> Happiness is specified by reference to certain aspects in which a human life must go well. If these aspects include doing the right thing, understood independently from Aristotle’s virtues, then his account of virtues relies on a prior notion of right and could, therefore, not count as a virtue ethics. If, however, doing the (independently) right thing is not built into the account of virtue, then it is hard to see how the definition of happiness yields the virtues as Aristotle understands them, as opposed to, say, Calliclean virtues. Broadie 2007: 115 develops the point beautifully.

<sup>17</sup> Frede 2014 offers a nice discussion of this problem.

<sup>18</sup> See Gottlieb 2009: 77 for further discussion.

#### 4. PRIORITY IN 2.6: ARISTOTLE'S DEFINITION OF VIRTUE

Aristotle begins defining the genus of virtue in chapter 2.5 as a state (*hexis*) of character. Having discussed the differentia in 2.6, he defines virtue as 'a character state in the middle relative to us issuing in decision, the middle being determined by reason, namely reason by which the wise person would determine it' (1106b36-1107a2). Although the term 'issuing in decision' (*proairetikē*) points forward to the full discussion of decision in 3.2-4, it also points backward to the theme of motive: a virtuous person decides on the just and moderate things for their own sakes (cf. 2.4.1105b28-32). What we choose to do, and how we do it, depends centrally on our emotional response to the situation: many of our actions are, if not prompted, then at least informed by various forms of pleasant or distressing emotions such as fear, boldness, desire, anger and pity (cf. 2.5.1105b21-3) — all of which can be excessive, deficient, or in the middle (2.6.1106b18-20). The associated actions will likewise be excessive, deficient, or in the middle (b23-4). A decision issued by virtue will therefore involve neither excessive nor deficient emotional or practical responses.

How are we to understand 'excessive', 'deficient' and 'middle'? Aristotle appears to offer two answers: virtue is 'a middle state between two bad states, one of deficiency, and the other of excess, and also because ... virtue both finds and chooses the middle in affections and actions' (2.6.1107a2-6). The question whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist invites us to probe the relation between virtue as a middle state and the middle response. Is virtue a middle state primarily because it issues in middle responses, or are the responses issued by virtue in the middle primarily because they are issued by a state which is independently a middle state? According to the response-first reading, virtue as middle state derives from the prior and independent notion of the middle response; according to the state-first reading, responses count as middle only insofar as they stem from a middle state. I begin with the state-first reading.

##### 4.1 Priority of the state

According to the state-first reading, we can explain 'excessive', 'deficient' and 'middle' only through the states issuing the response. Aristotle introduces the triad on the back of the equal, the larger and the smaller on a continuous and divisible scale (2.6.1106a26-9). If we follow Aristotle in focusing on the emotional response and take our cue from the quantitative terms, we may take Aristotle to suggest that emotional responses are right (and wrong) whenever they hit (or miss) the middle on a continuous and divisible scale of quantities (1106b24-7). For instance, one's anger might arise too late, be too intense, be held for too long etc. But, according to the state-first reading, as soon as we start considering more complex situations, we face a difficulty. Suppose you are angry because you have received a flagrantly insulting email from a student. Your anger flares up, but on closer examination, the student seems to suffer from a serious mental illness — in which case the anger should subside immediately: in view of the full picture anger ceases to be appropriate. While the example shows why Aristotle rejects the arithmetical middle (cf. 1106a29-b5) — the



right and middle response does not always lie in the middle between too little (say zero anger) and too much (extreme rage) — it also raises the general question why Aristotle thinks the right response should have anything to do with the middle. Why, in other words, does he subscribe to any ‘doctrine of the mean’ rather than a ‘doctrine of the right and appropriate’?<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle’s earlier discussion in 2.5 prepares the answer: the emotional responses stem from certain capacities which tend to develop into states ‘in virtue of which we are in a good or bad condition with respect to the emotions’ (1105b25-7). Excellent character states, virtues, prompt us reliably to respond well; defects of character prompt us not to respond well. But the incorrect responses form a pattern: one person tends towards deficient responses, another towards excessive ones. Aristotle therefore postulates corresponding states of character issuing excessive and deficient responses respectively: each individual virtue lies between an excessive and a deficient state. We can then evaluate an emotional or practical response as lying in the middle relative to us by reference to the issuing state: an individual response lies in the middle insofar as it stems from and expresses a middle state.<sup>20</sup> Returning to the example, responding with zero anger lies in the middle insofar as it expresses the middle state called ‘good temper’, a state between irascibility and “unanger” (apparently of Aristotle’s coinage, 2.7.1108a4-9). Although the unangered and the good-tempered person alike respond with zero anger, the former fails to hit the middle: not because she does so for the wrong reasons (she may or may not), but because she *never* exhibits anger, i.e. she fails on the score of frequency, a difference hard to account for by concentrating on individual actions rather than character. Thus, according to the state-first reading, assigning primacy to character over the response accounts for and explains Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’.

#### 4.2 Priority of the response

Read in its own right, however, the text draws a different picture: far from assigning priority to the state over the response in emotion or action, Aristotle derives the definition of virtue from a prior notion of the middle response. He begins with a general point about excellence: anything capable of excellence will in virtue of its excellence a) be in a good condition and b) accomplish its work well (1106a15-17).<sup>21</sup> By introducing two very different examples — the excellence of eyes and horses — Aristotle supports the general application of a) and b) (a21-2), including to human beings as such: ‘the virtue of a human being is the state of character on which her goodness depends and as a result of which she will accomplish her work well’

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<sup>19</sup> Both Hursthouse 2006 and Brown 2013 urge Aristotle to give up speaking of the middle.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Urmson 1980. Broadie 1991: 97-102 explores this interpretation in greater detail.

<sup>21</sup> I reserve ‘virtue’ for excellence of character; in all other cases, I render *aretē* as ‘excellence’. ‘Work’ renders *ergon*, a concept wide enough to capture both separable products such as houses or shoes and self-contained activities such as seeing.

(1106a22-4). Turning to the nature of excellence, he seeks to elucidate further how excellence relates to being in a good condition and accomplishing one's work well. Aristotle begins his argument by explaining the success conditions for accomplishing one's work well. Distinguishing the arithmetical mean from the middle relative to us (1106a29-36), Aristotle observes that experts, avoiding excess and deficiency, seek out and choose the middle relative to us (1106a36-b7) and thereby accomplish their work well. Good works lie in the middle between excess and deficiency: adding or taking away anything would worsen them (2.6.1106b5-14). In the case of craft, expertise (*epistēmē*) explains the expert's reliably hitting the middle because, strictly speaking, *it* looks towards the middle and guides the works (*erga*) towards it (b8-10). The craftsperson's excellence thus consists in aiming at and hitting the middle relative to us.

Aristotle takes himself to have discovered a general feature of excellence involving reason: aiming at and hitting the middle explains the craftsperson's accomplishing her *ergon* well. Consequently, human excellence, virtue of character, should aim at and hit the middle too (2.6.1106b14-16), which Aristotle hastens to confirm. By giving a few examples of emotional responses (getting angry, feeling fear etc, b18-24), Aristotle drives home the point that emotional and practical responses *can* hit or miss the middle and *are* praiseworthy and right (both marks of virtue) when they lie in the middle relative to us.<sup>22</sup> Human excellence, Aristotle concludes, has the same structure as craft: 'virtue is a kind of middle state, at least *insofar as (ge)* it is effective at hitting the middle' (b27-8). After showing how the conclusion coheres with things said about going wrong and getting it right, Aristotle defines virtue as a character state in the middle relative to us issuing in decision. Thus, contrary to the state-first reading, Aristotle does not start out with excessive and deficient states (crafts are not middle states) but rather defines excellence in general as a state hitting the middle via analogy to craft. The response-first reading stresses that Aristotle relies heavily on the notion of middle response which he so laboriously introduces through the analogy to explain the role of virtue in accomplishing the human *ergon* well.<sup>23</sup> According to the response-first reading, Aristotle does not merely illustrate the middle through craft, but rather derives the definition of virtue from the prior notion of a middle and right response.

#### 4.3 The return of the question

Aristotle's definition of virtue confirms the response-first reading: 'virtue is a state in the middle relative to us issuing in decision, the middle being determined by reason, namely reason by which the wise person would determine it' (1106b36-

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<sup>22</sup> Before setting it aside, I should perhaps say that I agree with Brown 2013: 69 n.8 on the middle 'relative to us': an action or emotion is in the middle relative to us if and only if it responds properly to the relevant human concerns which the particulars of the situation present. Human nature obviously constrains (reasonable) human concerns, but does not determine them.

<sup>23</sup> Brown 2013: 70-1 discusses this point more fully. Her whole article defends the reading outlined in this paragraph convincingly.

1107a2). Aristotle, as we have seen, argues for virtue as a middle state by reference to craft in 2.6; the qualification ‘middle relative to us’ simply transfers from response to state, as does its being determined by reason (*logos*, anticipated in 2.2). Now, the elucidation of reason as ‘reason by which the wise person would determine it’ further supports the response-first reading: the wise person’s reason hardly determines the middle state (although grammatically the Greek says that) — except indirectly via the middle response. The wise person does not or would not first determine a certain state whose responses count as middle in virtue of stemming from that state; rather she would determine the right responses such a state must issue when activated, and would thereby indirectly determine the state.

Aristotle’s exposition points towards the priority of middle action over virtue, but the reference to the wise person forestalls that conclusion. Since Aristotle does not believe that we can know what is the right thing to do in a particular situation until we ourselves are immersed in the situation (or if we follow an authority, the authority must be immersed), he can only say in a general way what the particular right action is, namely a hitting of the middle (2.2). But what counts as middle in a particular situation is what the wise person would determine as the middle. Therefore, the response-first reading as specified so far does not settle the priority of ethically good action over virtue: *that* question requires examining how the wise and virtuous person determines the middle.<sup>24</sup> Should the middle depend conceptually or in existence in some way on virtue or the virtuous and wise person, then virtue-notions would again have priority over ethically good action. Take the state-first reading: a response hits the middle only insofar as it stems from and expresses a middle state. The middle response — the right thing to feel or do — would not be independent of virtue; virtue would determine the middle response not merely by enabling its possessor to take good aim, but rather by being constitutive of what counts as the goal in the first place. The response-first reading denies the last step by pointing to the analogy between virtue and expertise in craft. While the expert uses reason encapsulated in her expertise to determine the right or middle response to the situation, what counts as middle in the first place does not depend on the expert’s reason: generally we can specify good craft products without reference to the expert. If virtue resembles craft, then virtue, just like any other expertise, causes the virtuous person to hit the middle, thereby producing an independently specifiable good outcome.

To sum up, Aristotle’s definition of virtue and the surrounding discussion in Book 2 leaves open the question whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist: like craft, virtue is a middle state insofar as it hits the middle, and unlike craft, it is a middle state insofar as it lies between two vices. When Aristotle proleptically refers to the wise person, he

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Brown 2013: 70 sets aside the reference to reason — as if irrelevant for the question whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist (to which she turns in the last part of her paper). Rapp 2006: 111-2 on the other hand thinks the addition starkly opposes Aristotle’s position to deontology and consequentialism.

raises the question whether the middle at which virtue aims depends in some deeper way on the wise and virtuous person. While Aristotle does not address the question of priority head-on in Book 2 (the puzzle in 2.4 concerns temporal priority), he nevertheless offers some material elsewhere, in Books 6 and notably 3, which helps *us* answer the question.

## 5. PRIORITY IN 3.4: THE GOOD MAN AS MEASURE

What role does the good and wise person's reason play in determining the middle? Aristotle turns to elucidating virtue, a 'state issuing in decision', by discussing agency in general and decision and its elements in particular in Book 3. He begins with decision and deliberation, the elements of action forwarding the goal (cf. 1113a12-14) and only then turns to explaining both what action aims at and how the particular goal enters the agent's deliberation (3.4).<sup>25</sup> Aristotle no doubt assigns a crucial role to virtue in deciding on an action: to perform a virtuous action virtuously an agent must decide on the action for its own sake — which tends to require a firm state built up through habituation (2.4.1105a31-b5). Thus, her state of character informs *how* the agent pursues the goal: virtue seems necessary for pursuing the goal in the virtuous way. But does the state of character likewise inform *what* the agent pursues as goal when she pursues a particular goal? Aristotle examines the goal's independence from the good and virtuous person in 3.4.<sup>26</sup>

### 5.1 The object of wish: three proposals

Aristotle develops his stance towards the goal of particular actions only in contrast to two other foils, with which we must start. He anchors the discussion on wish and its object: since 'wish is for the goal' (1113a15), he focuses on identifying the object of wish (or what is wished for, *boulēton*). One group postulates the good as object of wish, another group the apparent good (a16). Both proposals hit truth only partly. Aristotle takes the first proposal to be unduly restrictive. Suppose an agent can wish only for what is good. If she chooses what is in fact not good, she fails to wish for an object of wish — which, implausibly, rules out mistaken wishing.<sup>27</sup> The second proposal, by contrast, falls short by being too permissive. If appearing good to an agent just is being an object of wish, two opposing objects can share the status of being wished for if

<sup>25</sup> See Frede 2015 for helpful discussion of Aristotle's back-to-front order of exposition.

<sup>26</sup> Although Aristotle identifies the excellence associated with hitting the middle in action, i.e. responding in accordance with right reason, as wisdom (*phronēsis*), Book 6 does not much illuminate the question whether the standard or aim (*skopos*, 1138b22) is prior or posterior to the good person and her wisdom (cf. Taylor 2006: 108-10). If Book 6 is properly integrated in the *EN*, then Aristotle can regard the question about independence of the goal as settled in 3.4 — hence my focus. Obviously, the role of wisdom in Book 6 would need to be part of an exhaustive study of Aristotle's virtue ethical credentials; I will return briefly to it in my conclusion.

<sup>27</sup> As Socrates puts it in the *Gorgias*, if a person fails to do what is actually good [for him], he does not do what he wants (468d).

they appear good to different agents. Thus, whether X is an object of wish does not depend on its nature, but merely on whether an agent actually wishes for it (a20-2) — which, again, rules out mistaken wishing (supposing the agent cannot be mistaken about what appears good to her). While both proposals account for the Greek *boulêton*, they do not satisfy because each focuses on one aspect only. The first focuses entirely on tying the status of X as object of wish to X's being good, i.e. on what is wish-able, and neglects the agent's wishing, whereas the second starts from the agent's wishing for X — X's appearing good to an agent — and denies that there is more to being an object of wish.

Aristotle seeks to integrate the fortes of each into his own more comprehensive account: the insight that each person wishes for what appears good to her, and that being an object of wish does not reduce to being wished for by just anyone, i.e. that the nature of the object of wish must be taken into account. Aristotle proposes to restrict the unqualified and true object of wish to what is good (1113a22-4); everything else can only serve as qualified object of wish: what is good is without qualification *to be* wished for (yet another nuance of *boulêton*) — which becomes the agent's object of wish when it seems good to her. Since what is good must appear good to the prospective agent if she is to deliberate and act well, the object of wish and the object of wish without qualification coincide for the good person (a25). But does the alignment happen because the good person recognises an independent good, or because her decision-making determines what is good?

## 5.2 The object of wish: two measures

While the agent's wishing for a certain goal obviously depends on the agent, it is a real question whether its normative status does so too. Which standard determines whether something is worth wishing for without qualification? By alluding to Protagoras' famous *homo mensura* thesis ('man is the measure of all things ...' DK 80 B1) Aristotle may indicate that he develops a response-dependent account of the object of wish according to which the object of wish without qualification depends importantly on the good person's response to it. Aristotle rejects the suggestion that whatever seems good to any given person *is* good (without qualification) by driving a wedge between an object's appearing good and an object's being good: what appears good to the bad person is fortuitous (1113a26) and not automatically good. According to Aristotle, one can make mistaken choices by wishing for what is not in fact good because an object's goodness outstrips its appearing good to just any person. But how? In response to Protagoras, Aristotle likens the good person to 'a carpenter's rule (*kanōn*) or measure (*metron*) for every case' (a32-33). Aristotle here seems to correct Protagoras on the object of wish by replacing 'whatever seems good to any given person *is* good (without qualification)' with 'whatever seems good to the good person *is* good (without qualification)', suggesting that an object is to be wished for *because* it seems

good to the good person.<sup>28</sup> Aristotle could thus explain well why the object of wish and the object of wish without qualification coincide for the good person (a25): for the goal of an action to be good *just is* for it to appear good to her — which would indeed make the good person the measure of what is good in action.

The good person will be a measure in a different way, if Aristotle rejects the Protagorean approach more fully by denying that the good person's judgement plays any special role in X's being the unqualifiedly good thing to do. In particular, if the nature of the object can be specified independently of anyone's attitude towards it, the link between appearing good to the good person and being good without qualification no longer exists by fiat. If the unqualified object of wish is thus independent from the good person's responses, she would rather characteristically *detect* what is good independently of her judgement: what is good without qualification appears good to her. The good person's response would thus be measured in the sense that it measures up to reality — a reality independent of at least her responses. The good person would thus be a measure in correctly discerning what is good because her responses are characteristically appropriate, i.e. measured to any given situation (cf. *Met.* 1053a31-b4).

### 5.3 Aristotle against response-dependence

In which sense is the good person a measure? If Aristotle develops the response-dependent position as sketched, the good person's object of wish would be what is to be wished for without qualification in virtue of appearing good to her or to any good person similarly well placed. The structure of the text may seem to support such a reading: at 1113a25-6 Aristotle maintains that 'for/to the good person <the object of wish> is the true object of wish; for/to the bad person a chance object'.<sup>29</sup> Supporting the primacy of the person in a good state with two examples, Aristotle explains the role of appearance: 'for (*gar*) the good person judges each case correctly, i.e. the truth appears to him in all cases' (a30-1). Now, if the truth concerning the true object of wish appears to the good person and this appearance *explains* why the true object of wish is the true object of wish not only *to* her, but also *for* her, then what is good for her is good *because* it appears so to her. If the good person's responses provide the measure, then what appears to the good person would be true in virtue of its appearing so to her.

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<sup>28</sup> For the sake of brevity, I write as if an object's being to be wished for depends on actual responses. However, the good person could also be the measure if the unqualified object of wish conceptually depends on the good person: X is to be wished for without qualification if X is such that the good person would choose it. Aristotle distinguishes between priority in being and in account in *Met.* 9.8.

<sup>29</sup> I render the datives in the Greek as 'for/to' because on the present proposal, there is no real difference between 'X appears good to the good person' and 'X is good for the good person'. Further on this point, Gottlieb 1991: 30-1.

The details, however, provide a stumbling block for this reading. In particular, the examples illustrating Aristotle's claim at 1113a25-6 tell against any kind of response-dependence. First, 'just as in the case of the body, for those in a good condition, healthy are things that are truly such <sc. healthy>, but for sick people different things...' (1113b26-8). While Aristotle undoubtedly holds up the healthy person as paradigm and reference point for the extension of 'healthy without qualification', he does not attach any further importance to the role of appearance, as would be required. Even if 'X appears healthy to the person in good condition' implies 'X is healthy for her',<sup>30</sup> the further claim that 'X appears healthy to the person in good condition' just is 'X is healthy for her' finds no support in Aristotle. If we ask why a certain food is healthy, the answer usually makes no reference to how it appears to anyone; the answer makes reference to the organs whose well-functioning constitutes health.<sup>31</sup> So, while healthy things appear healthy to the healthy, we cannot say that an object's appearing healthy to someone, even the good person, just is its being healthy: health is not a response-dependent concept.

If the first example tells against response-dependence, so does the second one — at least Aristotle intends them to work alike: '... and likewise (*homoiōs*) with bitter, sweet, hot, heavy and all other things' (1113a28-9, quote continued). For those in a good condition, things are bitter, sweet, hot, or heavy which really are bitter etc, whereas those in a bad condition may get things wrong. However plausible a response-dependent construal of those qualities e.g. via competent observes under normal conditions may seem to us nowadays, if qualities Q such as bitter, sweet etc are like health, then Aristotle denies that 'X appears Q to the person in good condition' just is 'X is Q for her': there is more to being Q for a good person than its appearing Q to her. Support for a response-independent construal of sweet, bitter, etc abounds outside the *Ethics*. All the qualities mentioned are embedded in Aristotelian scientific theories: they are what they are in virtue of their explanatory role, not in virtue of our responses to them.<sup>32</sup> The scientific understanding of the qualities thus drives a wedge between

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<sup>30</sup> Being attracted by the right kind of food belongs to physical well-functioning and being in a good bodily condition (cf. 9.5.1176a3-9), whereas being in a bad bodily condition does not align what is attractive to the person and what is good and healthy for her (cf. 7.14.1154a22-b15).

<sup>31</sup> *Hist. An.* 10.1.633b16-23 and *Phys.* 6.1.224a25-6. Elsewhere, Aristotle describes health as 'consisting in a blending of hot and cold elements in due proportion, in relation either to one another within the body or to the surrounding' (*Phys.* 7.3.246b4-6; cf. *DA* 1.4).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, an object's being heavy explains why it moves to the bottom or towards the centre of the universe (*DC* 4.4); it would be absurd if the object were heavy because it appears so to a good judge. The other examples do not fare better: heat's role in constituting the four elements (*GC* 2.3.330a30ff.) and in digestion (*DA* 2.4.416b28) leave no room for response-dependence. Heat, in fact, is closely related to sweetness and bitterness: heat causes concoction (*pepsis*), a chemical process key to both digestion (food has to be concocted to nutriment) and reproduction (semen and menses are

appearing Q and being Q (even *for* someone): what is sweet, warm, bitter and heavy without qualification is determined by the scientific theory. Just as in the case of health and partly for the same reasons — digestion and warmth are key to health (cf. *EN* 10.5.1176a12-15) — the person in a good condition will discern correctly how things really are.<sup>33</sup>

#### 5.4 The independence of the object of wish: Aristotle's recognitionalism

Aristotle's use of the two examples points firmly towards response-independent qualities: if what appears X and what is X coincide for the exemplary perceiver, neither example indicates that the exemplar's perceiving contributes anything important to what it is to be X. Since the examples serve to illustrate the connection between the unqualified object of wish and the good person, we should adopt an alternative reading which does not make the unqualified object of wish dependent on the good person via appearance or judgement. Thus, there is a conceptual difference between X's seeming good to the good person and X's being good for her: the good person does not perceive correctly by fiat. We should, therefore, not translate *tō(i) spoudaiō(i)* in 1113a25-6 as 'for the good person' (as on the previous proposal), but as 'to the good person <the object of wish> is the true object of wish; to the bad person a chance object'. In other words, Aristotle seeks to explain in virtue of what the unqualified object of wish appears good to the good person. So, Aristotle's explanation that 'the good person discriminates (*krinei*) correctly in each case, and in each case, what is true is apparent to him' (1113a29-31) means what it appears to mean: what stands out about the good person is 'his ability to see (*horan*) what's true in every set of circumstances' (a32-3) where the truth is independent of the observer. And since this feature of the good person prompts Aristotle to compare him to a carpenter's rule (*kanōn*) or measure (*metron*), the comparison does not invite any form of response-dependence on the good person: the good person's response measures up to how things really are independently of his response.<sup>34</sup>

If the good person's response does not in some way constitute the good and right response, Aristotle not only avoids more general problems for a more thorough response-dependent account of goodness (Does the good person's goodness also

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concocted from blood). Aristotle is thus led to think that everything is nurtured by what is sweet (*De Sensu* 442a2): this is what the body extracts from food stuffs, leaving behind only bitter waste (*Mete.* 2.2.355b7; cf. *Gen. An.* 4.8.776a28-9).

<sup>33</sup> I thank Anthony Price for helping me to appreciate Aristotle's position.

<sup>34</sup> 10.5.1176a18 (virtue and the good person are the measure) resembles the present account. At 5.10.1137b29-33, Aristotle likens the decent person to a *kanōn*, because the decent person corrects the deficiency which law sometimes creates when applied to difficult individual cases. Far from suggesting the decent person's response constitutes what is right, Aristotle likens her to the leaden *kanōn* in Lesbian building in particular, which adapts itself to the stone, as if the decent person adapts the given laws well to the situation.



depend on her seeming good to herself?), but also provides a more persuasive account of virtue. Since Aristotle effectively defines virtue as the state of character issuing in middle responses, his definition of virtue would be too narrowly circular if the wise person's response constitutes the middle, since having wisdom requires full virtue of character (6.13.1144b30-1145a6): virtue is the state that hits the middle and the middle just is what the virtuous person perceives as middle. If, however, what constitutes the middle does not depend on the wise and virtuous person's response, Aristotle's account escapes at least *that* circle. Of course, the definition of virtue *does* make reference to the wise person, but if we accept the recognitionalist reading of 3.4, the reference need not tie up Aristotle in a vicious circle. If the middle and right response does not depend on the good person's response, Aristotle can, as he does, make reference to the good and wise person to indicate the sort of reason used in determining the middle in individual cases — without jeopardising his account of virtue.<sup>35</sup>

To conclude, Aristotle's discussion of the object of wish supports the conception of virtue developed in 2.6 that virtue enables its possessor to accomplish her work well by making the good person reliably perceive the situation correctly: the good person perceives the situation correctly and thus reliably recognises the unqualified object of wish because virtue attunes its possessor to what is fine (*kalon*) and pleasant in any given situation.<sup>36</sup> Non-virtuous agents succumb especially to misleading pleasures (a33-b1), which makes them miss the middle (1104b21-3; cf. EE 2.10 ad fin.). The reference to the wise person in the definition of virtue in 2.6 should not be read as indicating that the middle depends on the wise and good person's responses as outlined above: the wise person's judgement does not constitute the middle; it hits the middle.<sup>37</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The value of addressing the question whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist lies in the new perspectives we gain. Having framed the question in terms congenial to Aristotle's framework — whether excellent states of character are prior to ethically good action — we found Aristotle's closest equivalent to be a question about middles: is

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<sup>35</sup> Aristotle would be caught in an epistemological circle if he made recognising the truth in a particular practical situation the prerogative of virtue. But clearly, many non-virtuous people know that they should pay back the money they borrowed, to whom, when etc.

<sup>36</sup> Virtue further contributes to making the right decision insofar as it aligns the agent's desire with the result of the deliberation for the end. Virtue thus plays a crucial role in motivating the agent to act well.

<sup>37</sup> Obviously some facts about the good person are features of the situation. For instance how much I should give out of generosity depends partly on my bank balance. But Aristotle's discussion does not support the stronger thesis that an action is to be wished for because the virtuous person would wish for it. On the further question to what extent the right and good thing to do depends on human nature (perhaps exemplified by the good person in particular), see Charles 1995.

middle action prior to middle states of character, or vice versa? Although Aristotle does not explicitly advocate the priority of action over character in an account of ethically good action when defining virtue in 2.6, in the context of comparing Aristotle to virtue ethicists the reference to the wise person in his definition of virtue nevertheless raises the question whether the appropriateness of response somehow depends on virtue of character. While Aristotle counts a state of character as virtue both if (i) it is concerned with deciding on middle responses and (ii) it lies between two vices, he winds up assigning priority to (i) in 3.4. He eschews any kind of response-dependence of the object of wish on the wise and good person: likening the object of wish to other notions which he clearly considers to be response-independent, Aristotle cannot take the wise person's decision to constitute the ethically good thing to do. A practical response is appropriate insofar as it gets the parameters right, where appropriateness does not depend in any significant way on the virtue: the good and wise person decides on X because she perceives X as (independently) to-be-done.

While undermining the alleged support for Aristotle's virtue ethical credentials through a close reading of two key passages falls short of removing Aristotle from the Pantheon of virtue ethics for good, it nevertheless casts doubt on Aristotle's status as a sacred cow of virtue ethics — if we use the priority of virtue over ethically good action as characteristic of virtue ethics. Not imputing virtue ethics to Aristotle has several advantages. First, on the "local" level of the text, assuming a priori that Aristotle is a virtue ethicist, we will read the text in a certain way that conforms to the "doctrine" — in which case we will misread two central passages, on the definition of virtue and on the role of virtue in selecting the ethically good thing to do. To boot, virtue ethicists tend to disregard Aristotle's commitment to theoretical contemplation (*theōria*). If good character were the primary notion in Aristotle's ethics, we would be hard-pressed to explain how contemplation can find a place in the best life at all, let alone why Aristotle extols the life of contemplation over the life of the merely ethically good private person or politician (10.7-8). Accommodating Aristotle's focus on lives (rather than individual unconnected actions) does not require a virtue ethical framework. Happiness as the highest good obviously plays the key role in Aristotle's ethics. Since virtuous activity is central to happiness, virtue will be central too — but not primary. Although Aristotle's exposition starts with happiness, on a theoretical level he builds up the notion of happiness from more basic (and better known?) notions: from independently specified good action (in terms of the middle) he defines virtue, a notion which serves to define the virtuous person, whose activities, in turn, lead to a happy life. Thus, as far as Aristotle's text goes, a virtue ethical framework does not aid our exegesis or understanding.

Now to the more "global" implications. If Aristotle is not a virtue ethicist, what is he? If we define teleology and deontology as comprehensive, but mutually exclusive

theories, then Aristotle's ethics has to be one or the other.<sup>38</sup> While comparing and contrasting Aristotle's ethics with our normative theories may illuminate the structure of both Aristotle's and our theories, neither deontology nor teleology captures the spirit of Aristotle's ethics. The difficulty of slotting Aristotle's ethics into any of the existing normative theories probably contributed to the project of postulating an alternative, namely virtue ethics — as if we could take Aristotle's ethics seriously only if he endorses a normative theory recognisable by us.<sup>39</sup> Conceiving of Aristotle as deontologist or teleologist (as understood in the mid-twentieth century) masks what is interesting and important about Aristotle's ethics: its offering a sustained examination of the most important factors for the good life. And here virtue ethics, especially eudaimonist virtue ethics, comes much closer to capturing what matters to Aristotle: happiness, lives, virtue, character, moral psychology, friendship and action. However, this assessment rings true only if we rely on outdated conceptions of the alternatives. In the wake of Anscombe's attack on modern moral philosophy, ethicists of all stripes have attended more to the issues close to Aristotle's heart, partly in response to the impetus of "Aristotelian" virtue ethicists. We need not regard Aristotle as a forerunner of contemporary normative theories to take him seriously. Aristotle's contribution to re-invigorating the study of ethics may be understood best as a testament to the fruitfulness of engaging with a philosopher who defies easy classification.

Let us finally turn to the implications for virtue ethics. We started with the now outdated ostensive definition of virtue ethics as 'what Aristotle does'. Aristotle, however, does not seem to present an alternative to teleological or deontological theories if we take their respective accounts of ethically good action as the fault-line: while the object of wish is cast in terms of goodness, Aristotle need not take goodness to be the only relevant factor for evaluating and justifying action: he may count some actions as to be done or avoided simply in virtue of the type of action, regardless of their relation to goodness.<sup>40</sup> In any case, character does not seem to play the role in Aristotle's account that it does in contemporary virtue ethics. So, virtue ethicists could let go of their sacred cow: Aristotle helped shape contemporary virtue ethics, but more as instrument than paradigm. Alternatively, and especially in the light of recent

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Frankena 1973: 15 writes: 'Deontological theories deny what teleological theories affirm. They deny that the right, the obligatory, and the morally good are wholly, whether directly or indirectly, a function of what is non-morally good or of what promotes the greatest balance of good over evil for self, one's society, or the world as a whole. They assert that there are other considerations that may make an action or rule right or obligatory besides the goodness or badness of its consequences'.

<sup>39</sup> Baron 2011: 26. Timmermann 2015 develops Baron's criticism of the term 'deontology' as a useful classification of ethical theories.

<sup>40</sup> Two critical cases are i) the wrongness and badness of adultery, theft and murder (2.6.1107a11-12) — does he have to say that they are not to be done because they are bad? And ii) courageous action: should an Athenian take up arms to defend his city because it is good, or simply because it is his duty?

criticism of virtue ethics as a distinct ethical system,<sup>41</sup> virtue ethicists could curb their aspirations and return to their roots. If virtue ethics *is* what Aristotle does (or the kind of thing), then virtue ethics would be what is now called ‘virtue theory’, the systematic study of virtue, but *not* a distinct normative theory. The answer to the question whether Aristotle is a virtue ethicist will ultimately depend on which turn virtue ethics takes: if it presents itself as a distinct normative theory, complete with its distinctive account of ethically good action, then Aristotle should not be regarded as a sacred cow; if virtue ethics presents itself not as a rival to already existing deontological or teleological normative theories, but rather as the sustained study of virtue, then Aristotle ought to be revered as a prime sacred cow.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See especially Crisp 2015.

<sup>42</sup> I have presented material that fed into the paper at the Old Chestnuts and Sacred Cows seminar at King’s (twice), the Old Chestnuts and Sacred Cows conference in France, the staff seminar at King’s and at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. I thank the audiences for their helpful comments, particularly MM McCabe. I would like to thank especially Ralf Bader, Sarah Broadie, John Callanan, Anthony Price, Shaul Tor, Katja Vogt and the editors, Verity Harte and Raphael Woolf.

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